

‘Can We Do More?’ Community Asks After Concert Deaths

By Susan Kim, Staff Writer

September 2, 2014 - When two concertgoers died and others were hospitalized during an electronic dance music festival on Aug. 1 at Columbia’s Merriweather Post Pavilion, many local community members wondered whether these deaths could have been prevented.

Two young men, ages 20 and 17, died after attending the festival, while 19 others were hospitalized. Police suspect most of these cases involved the club drug known as Ecstasy, or “Molly.” Howard County police said 50 people were cited for underage drinking at the concert, as well.

The deaths, widely publicized locally and nationally, left many people asking: “Are we doing enough to keep young people free from drugs, including alcohol?”

Howard County State’s Attorney Dario Broccolino, who sees case after case of criminal prosecutions (drug-related and not), believes the effort is there, but it’s difficult to measure the success. Unfortunately, he said, tragedies draw more attention than quiet victories.

“The success has to be measured among individuals on a household by household basis,” Broccolino said. “You’re trying to show what didn’t happen. That’s impossible to do.”

Fighting the Fight

Joan Webb Scornaienchi has spent the last five years trying to do “the impossible” and, with the help of community leaders like Broccolino, she’s determined to continue the fight, even when results are intangible.

Scornaienchi is Executive Director of HC DrugFree, a nonprofit organization that aims to empower the community to eliminate the abuse and illegal use of alcohol and other drugs among youth. HC DrugFree is contracted to provide substance abuse prevention services on behalf of the Howard County Health Department, and also leads a county alcohol coalition with a focus on environmental change that is measurable — not impossible.

In her words, Scornaienchi’s job is about “stepping up.” While she doesn’t have kids of her own, she “[spends her] life trying to save somebody else’s kid,” she said.

Broccolino works closely with Scornaienchi on the alcohol coalition and is also a vocal supporter of HC DrugFree.

Events like the recent tragedies at Merriweather have only strengthened their resolve to keep working on educational programs and awareness campaigns that reach not only young people and their parents, but every adult who impacts the lives of young people around them.

“We keep banging away at it,” said Broccolino. “We’re trying to get this message out. I believe it has impacted at least a few folks,” he said. “We’ve saved a few lives — and a few futures.”

Stop the ‘Blame Game’

Unfortunately, especially when a young person dies from a drug overdose, a grieving community tends to adopt a stance of blame. The media portrays vocal critics of everything from concertgoers, to music choices, to local police, to “kids these days.”

Scornaienchi wishes people would stop trying to push the problem off on someone else and take just one constructive step themselves: participate in a Drug Take Back Day, enroll in overdose response training or talk to a young person about underage drinking and substance abuse.

“We can’t push this off on Merriweather,” she said. “We can’t push this off on the police. We can’t push this off on schools.”

Howard County Police Chief Gary Gardner said the community has taken significant strides forward, but still has to keep moving on an issue that requires constant attention.

“I think we have made great progress working with teens and parents in curbing drug and alcohol use,” he said. “However, I believe there is still room for improvement. Binge drinking among teens is still a problem, and the recent connection of the dangerous drug ‘molly’ being used at EDM [electronic dance music] festivals is of great concern. The loss of two young men last month should have never happened, and we must do more to get the message out.”

Gardner, Scornaienchi and others remain determined to drive a local effort that draws together the many facets of a young person’s life: concert venues, law enforcement, schools, parents, community members and young people themselves.

The alcohol coalition, through a state grant from the Alcohol and Drug Administration, has paid for extra police patrols at Merriweather events. Merriweather representatives serve on the coalition and openly discuss ways to help prevent and respond to young people who make the wrong decisions regarding drugs and alcohol.

Ultimately, people are responsible for themselves, pointed out Seth Hurwitz, chairman of I.M.P., operator of Merriweather Post Pavilion. “Well, we can’t help what people do to themselves, but we provide a safe environment on our end, and we’re constantly adapting to new challenges. I want to people to have a great time and get home safely.”

If kids have a good time, it shouldn’t be because parents are giving them alcohol illegally or because they have access to prescription drugs that have been sitting unmonitored in the kitchen cabinet.

Uncontrolled prescription drugs have been drawing increasing media attention as young people often have ready access to them. Parents, no longer worried about “child-proof” caps as children enter their teen years, need to start worrying about ensuring their medications are secure for different reasons.

“Drug Take Back Days are a wonderful time to clean out the medicine cabinets of parents and grandparents,” pointed out Scornaienchi. The next National Drug Take Back Day will be Sept. 27, and a Howard County location will be announced.

Be Parents, Not Friends

By far, alcohol remains the most popular drug among teens and is responsible for more deaths among youth than all other drugs combined. Yet, it’s an underrated problem in the minds of parents, youth and the community at large, said Marjorie Rosensweig, who is working with Scornaienchi to evaluate local programs and campaigns to prevent abuse of alcohol and other drugs.

“Most adults have consumed alcohol with no lasting ill effects, so they don’t see why it’s a problem for youth,” said Rosensweig. HC DrugFree is releasing a campaign with the slogan, “Be A Parent, Not A Friend,” aimed at supporting parents in setting rules that prevent use of alcohol and other drugs by youth.

Children are beginning to drink alcohol at younger ages, and research documents that the younger one starts, the more likely it is that alcohol will be a problem, said Rosensweig. “Few people understand the science behind alcohol and the damage its use can do to the developing brain. Youth drink these days to get drunk — and parents think they’re ‘protecting’ their kids and keeping them safe if they allow drinking in their homes under parental supervision.”

That’s not safe, responsible, or even legal, pointed out Scornaienchi, who regularly informs parents that the fine for providing underage drinkers with alcohol can be as high as \$2,500 per youth.

We can’t leave it all up to parents, either, though, she said. “There are an awful lot of parents out there who did everything right, but their kids are now dead. Everyone out there can do something better. You wish for the best — and you don’t stop. Don’t just be ‘done’ with this,” she said.

For more information, visit hcdrugfree.org.

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